

ACTION RESEARCH

WITHOUT THE QUEST, THERE CAN BE NO EPIPHANY. — DEAN C. ROSS (2011, 196)

Let me be clear from the start: My action research journey in the land of evidence-based practice was not my idea. I was lured by our profession's finest scholars who advocated for reflective dispositions for practitioners to improve their practice and demonstrate the school librarian's critical role in teaching and learning. In their book *Tales Out of the School Library: Developing Professional Dispositions*, Gail Bush

and Jami Jones assert that the dispositions in the action strand of AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* "become the *de facto* dispositions for school librarians, because, in the words of NBPTS [National Board for Professional Teaching Standards], accomplished teachers are 'models of educated persons, exemplifying the virtues they inspire in students'" (2002, 4). Bush and Jones provide an overview

of those dispositions, adapted from the AASL standards:

- Display initiative, engagement, emotional resilience, persistence, curiosity;
- Demonstrate confidence, self-direction, creativity, adaptability, flexibility, personal productivity, leadership, teamwork, motivation;

A PERSONAL EPIPHANY AND JOURNEY WITH EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

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- Maintain (and employ) a critical stance, openness to new ideas;
- Use both divergent and convergent thinking;
- Have (and show) an appreciation for social responsibility. (2010, 4)

In my personal quest to acquire these dispositions I realized that action research (AR) provides the tools I need to ask critical questions,

gather and navigate through rich evidence, and transform what I learn from evidence into action. My quest for answers would help me develop and nurture the attitudes that enable best practice.

My journey began in October 2001 at AASL's 10th Conference and Exhibition in Indianapolis. I attended "The Research Process and Evidence-Based Practice" presented

by Carol Kuhlthau and Ross Todd from Rutgers University. By chance, Carol Gordon was sitting next to me. At the end of the presentation we began a conversation that lasted for four years. I confided that the session had me noodling about the district school library media and technology program I supervised in Londonderry, New Hampshire. Although the program was named an AASL School Library Media

Program of the Year in 2000 I sensed that we needed to take a next step, but I wasn't sure where to take it. **I was open to new ideas!**

My epiphany was an "a-ha!" moment generated by the vision Kuhlthau and Todd described as evidence-based practice. At lunch my conversation with Carol Gordon made me **curious** as we sketched out a plan on a paper napkin. Could AR move our school libraries to another dimension? Could AR improve our quality of instruction? I wanted our school librarians to be more reflective about instructional design, delivery, and assessment. I had to figure out a way to get started with AR by the first of the year.

What was I thinking? Did I have the **emotional resilience and confidence** to make this happen in my district? I realized the timing was perfect for submitting a proposal to use the district's Title V funds targeted for improving the quality of education. And, as luck would have it, I was the district administrator in charge of the grant! I decided to take the **initiative** to develop an AR project. When funding was approved I realized I would have to be **persistent** to get the school librarians on board. The time crunch was challenging, and it was already the middle of a busy school year. The ambitious plan Carol and I hatched meant a course adjustment in the middle of the school year. I was determined to take a **critical stance**, stand my ground, and hope that the **teamwork** characteristic of the hard-working librarians would win them over. What happened next was something that I sort of regret—maybe. I resorted to trickery and subterfuge.

PROPOSAL FOR ACTION RESEARCH

Submitted by:

Date:

Research Question or Hypothesis:

INSTRUCTIONAL UNIT OR INITIATIVE:

Topic:

Team members:

TIMELINES:

Start:

Finish:

Description of project or unit. Please include details that would help someone replicate your unit. Grade Level? Curriculum objectives? Student product? Assessments (formative and summative)? Lessons taught? Support materials?

DATA COLLECTION. Please include at least two methods (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, grades, observation journal entries, photographs, student products/projects, formative assessments, focus groups, case studies, content analysis).

Figure 1. Form for action research proposal.

I invited Carol to the December department meeting held just before the holiday break. I deliberately dawdled in sending the agenda, which cryptically noted, "Dr. Carol Gordon, Boston University—Presentation." I am not sure what the librarians thought, but I knew they were familiar with Carol's work, so I was **confident** that they would take in stride the prospect of her visit—which they did. When they arrived they greeted Carol politely. Unaware of my chicanery, Carol launched into her description of action research as:

- Problem-focused;
- A solution-oriented investigation;
- Context-specific insider research;
- Future-oriented to some action or cycle of actions;
- A systematic, intentional inquiry that investigates professional practice to understand and improve work and;
- A tool for evidence-based practice.

And then the other shoe dropped! Carol talked about how action researchers create a plan to identify a problem in instructional practice, recognize evidence in student work, collect evidence through Guided Inquiry and authentic teaching

methods, analyze the evidence, and share with the school community what they have learned. So far, so good! Everyone was listening and interested. Then Carol revealed our plan. Each school librarian in the district would develop and execute her own action research. The timeframe for each librarian to develop an AR proposal was four weeks. Yikes! I could see the deer-in-the-headlights looks. I quickly ended the meeting. Phew! **Divergent** thinker that I am, I skillfully avoided the librarians' phone calls and e-mails for the next few days and waited for the calendar to run down to recess. Then, sure enough, just after we returned, Carol sent a template for proposal generation similar to the one in figure 1.

I observed from the sidelines via e-mail that it was slow going at first, but one by one the librarians **engaged** with AR. Carol's mentoring approach was to ask each action researcher to connect her proposal to educational theory. In Carol's initial presentation she reviewed the work of Kurt Lewin, the father of AR, Carol Kuhlthau's Information Search Process, and key ideas from major educational theorists: Benjamin Bloom, Jerome

ONE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIANS EXUDED STRONG SELF-DIRECTION IN HER COMMENT ABOUT THEORY: "NOW I KNOW WHY I DO WHAT I DO." THIS OPENED THE DOOR FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS TO BE MORE CREATIVE IN DESIGNING INSTRUCTION.

Bruner, John Dewey, Howard Gardner, George Kelly, Jean Piaget, Joseph Renzulli, Robert Sternberg, and my favorite Lev Vygotsky—I love his “zone of proximal development.” She emphasized that the powerful connection between these theorists’ work and what is known about how people learn empowers us to contribute, in our own way, to the knowledge base as we deepen our understanding so that we can improve our work. One of the school librarians exuded strong **self-direction** in her comment about theory: “Now I know why I do what I do.” This opened the door for school librarians to be more **creative** in designing instruction. For example, librarians saw the value of a variety of pedagogies such as authentic learning tasks, formative assessment, problem-based learning, and design thinking because they had a deep understanding of constructivist learning theory.

Another school librarian observed we were traveling “the bumpy road of action research.” We were sustained and guided by our knowledgeable and well-organized research mentor and by one another. As a result, our practice forever changed, and so did we. We learned how to pose researchable questions

and write proposals. Using journals, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observation we collected data that we shared with collaborating teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the school board. Some questions we explored were: How can we move high school students away from using only general search engines and toward delving into subscription databases? How do middle school students take notes, and how can we teach this skill better? Can third-grade students think abstractly through project work? As the librarians were conducting their AR and students were engaged in inquiry units, Carol Gordon was conducting her own research on the three-dimensional model she developed for the Londonderry Project. Her 2006 paper, “A Study of a Three-Dimensional Action Research Training Model for School Library Programs,” available in *School Library Research* <www.ala.org/aasl/slr>, gives a full description of the project.

One of our most powerful uses of action research allowed us to gain insight into students’ understanding of ethical use of information. This focus arose from reactions to our use of an online service to detect plagiarism. While the educators saw

the service as a prescriptive tool to help students understand citation and attribution, parents thought this type of service should not be necessary if we were doing our jobs. Hmmm—point well taken.

To identify the issues and assess prior knowledge and attitudes of students and teachers, we decided to adapt a survey developed by Southern Connecticut State University (naturally, with permission) and to apply skills we had developed in the design of two earlier AR projects. We developed age-appropriate scenario surveys, and students decided whether or not the actions described were examples of ethical use. The high school version was administered to students in grade ten; the elementary version was administered to students in grade five. Another survey was administered to high school teachers to determine teachers’ perceptions of how often students engaged in plagiarism and how often they confronted students.

The results were extremely beneficial. There was recognition of the need to clarify for teachers and students the school’s position on the ethical use of information and to provide intentional instruction and

interventions for students at an early grade level. Teachers were anxious to work with the school librarians to collaboratively address plagiarism issues (Ballard, March, and Sand 2009).

Action research raised the profile of school librarians as teachers and **leaders** who could influence our fellow educators and create demand for our programs. AR yielded data about teaching and learning that increased our **productivity**, made us more responsive to problems, and more **flexible** about solutions. Most importantly, we were able to **adapt** and improve instruction through an evidence-based model. Patricia Wood (1988) noted that AR validates teachers, is ongoing, and leads to continuous improvement. AR empowers teachers to collaboratively take responsibility for their own professional growth. Our success with AR led to its use across our school communities. Annually, teachers were given an opportunity to submit proposals to collaborate with school librarians, who mentored their teaching colleagues as Carol Gordon had done for the librarians. This collaboration made AR sustainable.

I am now retired from the school district, but as a library educator and independent consultant I continue to use AR to be **creative** in my work with pre-service students and clients. I help them identify important issues and frame them as problems in the form of questions that can be measured, evaluated, and aligned with theory and research. We choose appropriate data collection tools, develop timelines, and consider

how to sort, categorize, and display data. We generalize, note exceptions, and—what surprised us—make predictions about future possibilities. Findings always lead to an “a-ha!” realization that our practice must change. AR leads to further research because AR is recursive. It offers opportunities to share with stakeholders and our community at large through face-to-face and virtual venues.

From my perspective AR helps me recognize and value evidence-based practice that is connected to theory and research so I can develop those dispositions that Bush and



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Jones identified. AR and EBP have been indispensable in guiding my learning, though I still have a ways to go. A comment attributed to Michelangelo at the age of 87 sums it up: “*Ancora imparo.*” (“I am still learning.”) Action research and evidence-based practice set the course, mapped the journey, and focused my practice through a lens of reflection. I can’t wait to see where the journey takes me next!

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